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ABSTRACT

A recent broadcast on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) entitled "The Incredible Maching" showed that public television is capable of reaching a large audience. To further explore its potential to reach larger audiences, PBS has subscribed to public opinion polls to become more systematically aware of wants, desires, needs, and dreams of their viewing audiences. A second kind of research that should be conducted would be to develop pilot programs and to have the programs evaluated by their intended target audiences. Since each local station has its own audience, it is necessary that surveys be taken at the local level and that stations become accountable to their local audiences. Also, further research is needed to discern the effect of cable television on the popularity of PBS programing. (EMH)

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Research Outlook at CPB

Given at NAEB Convention

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Washington, D.C.

Leon Rosenbluth, Director of Communications Research

I'm the new boy on the block - when I was a kid the initiation to test the metal of the new boy was to beat up on him - I hope we've all outgrown that. At any rate, I survived my childhood and I find it a great relief, a great pleasure, and very encouraging to be in front of this audience where I can assume that nearly everyone knows what the initials CPB stand for let alone what is meant by PBS, NPR, NAEB, APRS, ACNO, EENT, etc., and I'll bet that some of you have even been able to define the objectives of Public Broadcasting for yourself. It takes some adjusting to come from behind the scenes in the advertising world, where I researched the various ways to con the public, into what is potentially the most visible of worlds where I am now going to research the ways to serve the public. I am still adjusting to the change. When I tell my friends in New York I work for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting they furrow their brows - have quizzical looks on their faces, pause a moment, and ususally respond with "What is that?" or "What does it do?" or "Is that PBS?" or, worst of all, "Oh, you work for channel 13." So I feel comfortable talking with this group.

So much for the problems of my adjustment to Public Broadcasting - they are minor compared to the enormous challenge presented by the opportunity to awaken the sleeping giant, public broadcasting, - to bring to a disappointed public, programming that will stimulate, inform, enter-

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tain, enrich, and otherwise affect the quality of life in these United States. With the stunning rating performance of the National Geographic special on October 28 - "The Incredible Machine" - the giant opened one eye and rekindled the hopes of those who had given up on public broadcasting. At the very least, "The Incredible Machine" proved that a good program, adequately promoted, can attract a substantial audience inspite of the complications of public broadcasting where this program was aired at its PBS fed time and day by almost 60% of the public television stations. The other stations premiered it at some other time and/or day, thus necessitating promotion on a local level - which, besides being more expensive than national network buys - the overlapping signal areas could create confusion. The situation was further complicated by the public's varying degrees of ignorance about how to tune in a UHF channel. Nevertheless, "The Incredible Machine" was an incredible success for Public Broadcasting.

Good programming is the name of the game and our first priority - but what constitutes good programming -- E.B. White characterized it very beautifully in a letter he wrote to the Carnegie Commisssion - he said, "Television should arouse our dreams, satisfy our hunger for beauty, take us on journeys, enable us to participate in events, present great drama and music, explore the sea and the sky and the woods and the hills. It should be our Lyceum, our Chautauqua, our Minsky's, and our Camelot. It should restate and clarify the social dilemma and the political pickle. Once in a while it does, and you get a quick glimpse of its potential."

Television, be it public or commercial, has a long way to go before it fulfills this idealistic and visionary use of the medium. I'd venture to say that 90% of what's broadcast on TV is more like visualized radio than an audio/visual experience.

CPB's prime function in the program area is to develop and fund national programming. I consider my prime responsibility, as research director of CPB, is to aid in that development. My first priority then, is to develop methodology for exploring and developing new programming ideas for national programs. Coupling this with public broadcasting's responsibility to serve the people leads me to start by finding out what people really want. I intend to initiate a dialogue with the public in a systematic way. Following E.B. White's trail, I want to find out what dreams the public has, what journeys they want to take, what events they wish to participate in, what their primary concerns, problems and interests are. We have taken a first step toward this end by subscribing to two syndicated services - the Monitor Study by Daniel Yankelovich and the Roper Reports. CPB, by becoming a subscriber to both of these studies, makes these data available to the family of public broadcasting.

Monitor, which is the study conducted yearly by Daniel Yankelovich, measures the social trends in the United States and their changes. It's a national sample of 2,500 people 16 years of age and over and interviews are conducted face to face not over the telephone. As of the 1975 study Yankelovich has deveolped 36 specifically defined social trends and the one that tops the list is "concern for personal safety" this particular

concern is felt by 49% of the people interviewed. This information will provide stimulating food for thought in terms of programming both national and local. These data will be disseminated to the individual stations as quickly as I can establish a format for doing so. By the way, with minorities the concern for personal safety trend is at a level of 60%. The study, in addition to isolating the trends, also provides many of the dimensions that make up each trend.

An imaginative producer or writer might very well study such information and create a program series that would address this issue. This is one of the ways in which this data can be utilized. Another is to develop program concepts based on the more prevalent trends and test these again among the general public. This we intend to do, thus beginning, what I hope will be a continual dialogue with the public.

The second national syndicated service which I have purchased are the Roper Reports. These reports deal with issues current at the time and various activities that people engage in. The study is done ten times a year utilizing a national probablility sample of 2,000 persons 18 and over. Thus at the end of a year we will have 20,000 interviews comprising an enormous wealth of data. Some of the information is trended over the ten studies such as leisure activities that people engage in, attitudes toward television programming, and the like.

The questionnaire, starting this month will contain questions to identify a public television viewer and it will be most interesting to look at the data by viewers and non-viewers. In the current report, for example,

people were asked whether they felt the TV programming this year was better, worse or about the same as last year - one out of four people said it was worse than last year. It will be helpful for us to look at this statistic by those who are public television viewers and those who are not. Having bought into the Roper Reports we have the opportunity to put questions into the study at various times and I fully intend to do so. This research vehicle might even be used to get us all off the hook of defining the objectives of Public Broadcasting-- we might ask the public to define it for us.

Again, these data really provide food for thought and a stimulus to some creative thinking and imagination regarding programs which might be produced to address some of the issues and concerns of our national population. Clearly, research for program development of a national level is basically national ascertainment which we intend to explore and experiment with this year.

In conjunction with these syndicated data we intend to field some original research. Nielsen tells us that in a four week period public TV reaches about 50% of the TV homes on an average of about once a week. As you might suspect these homes contain the upscale in education and income and tend to have the white collar workers. It's going to take research to find out how to reach that other 50% of the households -- the lower income and education people - the blue collar workers. Perhaps the current programming on PTV does not serve the needs of these people - well, what kind of programming will serve their needs--what are the needs, wants,

desires, dreams and fantasies of the blue collar class? That is one of the things we are going to be finding out in the coming year. The commercial world of advertising and marketing has through research methods, developed techniques to segment the market for various products. Obviously, different types of people want different things from different products - some brands satisfy those things and some don't. This same reasoning applies to TV audiences - particularly PTV audiences. Given that the average PTV viewer views PTV about once a week there is a lot of variation around that average - a good segmentation study will sort out the different kinds of PTV viewers. Segmentation can be accomplished on various dimensions - behavioral, attitudinal, benefit, etc. We will be searching for the right kind of segmentation criteria so we can better understand the kinds of programming that attract different kinds of people. It might even lead us to developing success criteria for different programs.

The second major area in the CPB research program is to evaluate the system as well as the programming. When the decisions have been made as to which areas of public interest or concern should be addressed by programming, CPB intends to fund pilot programs. These pilots will then be evaluated. This means measuring reaction from target audiences and/or general audiences. In the past, pilot programs have been evaluated using a viewing panel but generally under artificial circumstances. We intend to try some experiments on evaluating and testing pilot programs using various techniques such as cable TV, Theater techniques and other techniques

which are deemed suitable for the program situation. I'm a great believer in assessing reactions taken under as normal viewing conditions as possible. Our best estimate is that during the next year we will be evaluating some 12-15 different pilots for national program series.

I feel that Public Broadcasting is indeed a public trust and as such it should be accountable - that accountability, however, should not be to just a select few - if it is to be accountable it must be so to everyone - just as it is supposed to serve everyone. One measure of that accountability is certainly the broadcast rating system - both Nielsen and ARB. We purchase the Nielsen ratings for television - both on the national and local levels. We purchase ARB for radio on the local level and have just recently bought into the RADAR service for radio on a national level. We intend to continue to purchase the rating services.

One of the reasons Public Television received such critical acclaim for the National Geographic special was because a lot more people watched that program than had ever watched anything else broadcast on PTV. One way we knew that a lot of people watched that program was because it got a high rating from Nielsen. That night PTV passed its accountability test. I am not advocating a ratings race either within PTV or competitive to commercial broadcasting - nor am I going to get embroiled in the controversy of selective versus mass audience programming but the ratings are a very useful tool for program scheduling as well as providing input for decision making as to whether a program is making it or not. CPB must make

funding decisions, stations must make purchase decisions through the SPC, community stations or viewer and listener supported stations must make decisions about utilization of programs around which to put pledge breaks, etc. - these decision making groups deserve all the information they can get thus enabling them to at least make an informed guess. The average prime time rating for PBS programs is about 1.8 - whatever decision you have to make you might make differently if a program has a 1 rating or if it has a 2.4 rating. No matter what we think about broadcasting ratings they can be helpful in decision making as long as we are not completely ruled by them.

A very important part of the research program at CPB is concerned with local stations. As you know, the FCC is on the verge of making its decision regarding ascertainment procedures for local non-commercial radio and TV stations. CPB has filed with the FCC requesting a year's experimentation to determine the optimum model for ascertainment for public broadcasting stations. We do not feel that the methodology imposed upon commercial stations is applicable across the board to non-commercial stations. We are going to explore and experiment with different approaches to ascertainment using different types of stations with differing resources and community compositions. I am hoping to be able to explore methods most appropriate to the particular station circumstances and special conditions which may prevail in the community. I might add that ascertainment means far more to us than merely finding out the rank order of problems people have. We want to determine the interests and tastes of the public as well

as their communications behavior.

In order to carry out these experimental studies as well as provide expert research assistance to local stations - we are exploring the idea of setting up regional research resources around the country upon which any stations might call for assistance with any research endeavor they might wish to undertake - they could run the gamut from ascertainment to fund raising to audience analyses to program evaluation, membership drives, etc. The only qualifications which may be imposed are that there be some kind of matching effort from the station - be it money, labor or anything else.

To be eligible for actual funds from the CPB research budget the project must be applicable to other stations. I don't have the money to fund unique situation studies. I have already turned down a few requests for funds because the nature of the station or the project was unique and applicable to only that station.

An important need across the country are some research resources to assist local stations in their research efforts. I am proposing to set up such resources in various parts of the country so that every station - no matter how small or remote - can obtain assistance in their efforts to improve through research information. The resource I am contemplating will be ongoing and will be self perpetuating so that many people will be available as needed. For example one such resource might be the Annenberg School either in Los Angeles or in Pennsylvania. Both of these institutions have worked well for public broadcasting.

As I mentioned, this is being explored and is still in its formative stages - so if anyone within earshot has any ideas with respect to the kinds of groups we might consider or the kind of resource available I would appreciate hearing about it or any other suggestions or help someone might want to offer.

Finally, there are some special areas of research that I want to get into. One of these is the effect of cable TV on Public Broadcasting. When cable goes into a house or a town does it help or hurt PTV? We know that cable households view more than non-cable households but we don't know whether that is because the more frequent viewing households are the first to put in cable. Given that more channel options are available to cable homes - what effect does that have on PTV? With cable a UHF is automatically equal to a VHF in terms of tunability - how does that effect PTV? Very little research has been done on cable and I would like us to be prepared with information before we are merely in the position of reacting to a situation - as we so often find ourselves doing.

An area which is much talked about but sparsely researched is the role TV and radio play within a household. What is the meaning of TV in people's lives - how is it used - why does the average viewing houdehold have TV turned on for more than 6 hours a day? Can we classify viewers with respect to what TV means in their lives and then examine the image and perception of PTV within these classifications? This kind of information will have a significant bearing on the ultimate objectives PTV should have as well as give us additional insight into program development.

Another major undertaking is radio research - a much neglected area. At this point, we have very little idea of the characteristics of the Public Radio audience. I should mention some of the housekeeping plans we have. For example, we will establish a standardized definition of a public television/radio viewer/listener as well as standardizing the manner in which demographic characteristics are collected.

After trying to accomplish these plans I have outlined here - I estimate that I will have used up my total budget with perhaps a slight overrun - which seems the fashionable thing to have today. --

Thank you for your attention.